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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Secretary Richardson's Memorandum on Improving NIE's

Secretary Richardson's communication of June 16 (attached) speaks of both strengths and weaknesses he finds in NIE's. Only the latter are addressed in these comments, together with some of the more particular issues raised in an attached paper drawn up by his staff.

A General Reaction -- The Secretary's memorandum makes it clear that he considers the NIE a viable and needed form of support to policy. He is concerned to improve it, not to knock it. As such, his memorandum is one of the few positive reactions we have had from the present Administration.

It is fair to say that none of the issues cited by Mr. Richardson is new. Our collective memory recalls that all have been agitated in one way or another before, some at the very outset of our enterprise twenty years ago.

Without denying that we may have fallen into inadequacies or failed to adapt our art form to new needs, in some part it is true that the problems he raises are inherent in the nature of our mission and the way it is organized. For example, the separation of intelligence and policy was built in organizationally from the beginning for reasons, whatever one may think of them now, that were persuasive to the founders. Compounded by the great size of the government, this

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separation causes estimates to be communicated in a depersonalized, bureaucratic way which diminishes their authority. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, there is an inherent tension between the producers and users of estimative intelligence because an estimate is often bad news and can seldom deliver, in a chancy and disorderly world, judgments with the degree of assurance and precision the users would like. In this trade it is easy to become the fall guy for the policymakers' frustration with the intractability of things.

The Issues Raised -- Mr. Richardson's concerns are expressed most concretely in the paragraph beginning at the bottom of page 2 of his letter; some of the questions in his attached staff paper elaborate his points or are closely related.

"How can the estimators go to the heart of the problem if they are overly insulated from the analysis and concerns that motivate the policymakers?" -- We have long recognized the problem of achieving maximum relevance in our papers and would favor a closer involvement of BNE people with various study groups and policy-making committees where intelligence is given a role. We have people well qualified for this whose individual usefulness would also be enhanced. Some of our people do entertain contacts with opposite numbers or friends in policy-making components, but we have found these insufficient and no adequate substitute for regular official involvement. Obviously, to provide the latter would involve some rethinking of the ways in which the policy-support functions of the Agency are carried out.

The questions in Part B of the Richardson staff paper imply some ways to achieve greater contact between producers and users of estimates. Requestors are often not very precise about indicating the scope and content of estimates they would like (B.1.). We do, however, often seek consultation in order to get the focus of a project right. Probably we should do more of this, especially when, as frequently happens, we think that the questions posed are not very significant or apropos.

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For certain projects the laying on of a formal procedure to refine terms of reference (Question B.2.) would be a useful device. Assuming that this took place at an early stage in policy consideration, however, the policymakers might not know themselves what questions would turn out to be important in the course of their subsequent deliberations. No doubt intelligence estimators ought to be able to anticipate such questions, but it is clear that we do not always do so. Again, the only solution would seem to be a closer and more continuing contact between estimators and policymakers.

In this connection we have one suggestion which would involve a major change in format, whereby we would produce papers addressing only the particular questions of immediate concern to the consumer. Most NIE's are by ancient custom fairly self-contained, comprehensive, essays, which attempt to give a balanced presentation of a fairly broad subject. As such they probably contain much material that is either well known to the reader or irrelevant to his immediate need and therefore exasperating to him. Moreover, in the interest of a balanced presentation such papers are often inhibited from going deeply enough into questions of paramount interest. Once or twice we have issued estimates structured simply as a series of questions and answers. Perhaps we should try something like this more often, providing, of course, that we can ascertain what the proper questions are.

"Reliability is important, both for the producer and the user, but it is sometimes achieved by hedging and qualifications that dissipate the substance of the estimate." -- It often appears to us that consumers do not realize that all estimates are uncertain; if they were not, they would not be estimates; if they were delivered without qualifications they would be misleading and indeed dishonest. Doubtless this exposes estimators to the charge of sometimes fuzzing a judgment in order to avoid the risk of being caught out wrong. The estimative semantics we have developed to express degrees of probability (the "mights" and "probablys" and "almost certains") may encourage this and have sometimes been overused. Clearly we should make a conscious effort to be more crisp.

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On the other hand, the language we use is honestly intended to convey varying degrees of uncertainty. Perhaps its use has become too casual and routine. In any event, the Questions A.2. and A.3. contain useful suggestions for ways of registering uncertainty more explicitly. In particular, we can do more to explain what the precise area of uncertainty is, and why it exists.

"Inter-agency agreement is valuable when it is real, but not when it is obtained by cannibalizing differences or evading difficult questions." -- This observation, together with some of those in Questions A.2. and A.3., raises a point which we think is almost universally exaggerated. In coordinating NIE's differences do of course come to light, among individuals and among agencies. There are, in the first place, a multitude of minor, even trifling, disagreements on phraseology, or on small substantive matters of little consequence to anyone. These are always adjusted, though the adjustment often takes an unconscionable amount of time. To carry such differences into footnotes of dissent would weary the reader and obscure more important matters.

At the other extreme are clear-cut and pronounced differences of judgment on important questions. We are quite sure in our own minds that we have never consciously papered over these. They are in fact a good deal less frequent than seems commonly to be supposed. Nevertheless, it is not always as easy as might appear to identify which differences are significant enough to warrant a full setting-forth of opposing views. On this point our own conclusions may not always coincide with those of the consumer.

Between these two extremes lie those differences of judgment on fairly important matters which prove, usually after considerable discussion, to be quite narrow. In essence these are differences about the degree of certainty with which a given judgment should be delivered. It would seldom be worth while, however, to inform the reader that two agencies were 60 percent, two 65 percent, and two others 70 percent sure of their respective judgments; indeed, conscientious estimators

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do not cherish opinions so arithmetically precise. Accordingly, everyone agrees in attaching the adverb "probably" to the collective estimate. This represents a "real" agreement; not a papering-over.

In arriving at this kind of agreed estimate, however, we must use great care that in any reformulating of text during discussion we do not end up by evading the real issue. Perhaps we have been insufficiently vigilant in this respect. Assuming that this pitfall is avoided, however, these are the sorts of estimates in which, as mentioned above, the various considerations which lie behind the uncertainty should be spelled out more explicitly than we have usually done. It will be desirable on occasion to go more fully into various alternative plausible judgments, even though no agency disagrees with the one which represents the consensus.

We are unaware of any habit of deliberately "evading difficult questions". To be sure, we do not always know all of the difficult questions that are engaging the attention of consumers. There is a difference between intelligence and policy perspectives which can produce different ideas as to which questions are important. And there are questions concerning which we may incorrectly assume that the answers are already well established in the consumer's mind. On all such matters, as also in connection with that of "brevity", discussed below, some feed-back from consumers could be very helpful, as exemplified in Dr. Kissinger's recent letter inquiring about some points in a SNIE on Chinese Communist intentions.

"Brevity aims to make the findings more accessible to a busy reader, but may also make it more difficult for him to appraise the underpinnings and uncertainties of the analysis." -- We have now grasped the point of this criticism, and are making efforts to meet it, especially in the forthcoming military estimates. Yet we still seek to avoid cluttering papers with unnecessary verbiage, and may therefore fail to deal sufficiently with some of the problems which arise in a reader's mind.

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In this connection, Mr. Richardson observes in his first paragraph that the NIE's "seem to encapsule more information by far than they convey to the reader." These words actually describe pretty well what past estimates were intended to do. We have never looked upon the NIE's primarily as conveyors of intelligence information; that function was fulfilled by newspapers and cables, by innumerable other intelligence publications, and by staffers who briefed higher officials. Our concept of the NIE's was that they were to convey the judgments of the intelligence community, together with enough fact and argument to indicate but not exhaustively to set forth the basis on which these judgments rested. We got into the habit of working under the apparently justified assumption that the Messrs. Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, for example, were as well-informed as we on the background of the questions we treated, or at least that they could speedily become so by reference to their staffs, and that they required no lengthy and detailed exegesis in order to understand the "underpinnings and uncertainties of the analysis." Plainly, however, our adjustment to the new situation has been too slow.

A Study of User Needs -- Mr. Richardson suggests a "systematic" study based on interviews with senior users and their staffs. We once undertook something like this and found the results unrewarding. The trouble is that generalized questions or approaches get generalized answers. We should doubtless be told, for instance, that there ought to be more facts and argument in papers (which we already know) or that they ought to be shorter, or longer, or more numerous, or better timed, etc., etc.

Some of us believe that the most fruitful scheme would be a series of meetings with high-level users and their staffs, each meeting devoted to discussing one or two particular NIE's. In this way we could get down to brass tacks, without necessarily avoiding general issues. After a few such sessions we ought to have a good idea of just what further reforms may be desirable.

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Another suggestion would be to convene a meeting or series of meetings of top level policy people to go over the general problem with us. We could structure the discussions in such a way as to get at the main issues with minimum waste motion, and hopefully so as to elicit realistic advice. This would also provide an opportunity to impart something of what our customers need to understand about the nature, uses, and limitations of estimates.


In sum:

(1) We understand the desire for more explicit setting forth of areas of uncertainty in estimates and of the reasons why uncertainty exists.

(2) We also recognize the felt need for more extensive treatment of the facts and arguments which lie behind important estimates, as well as of those which support clear-cut and pronounced differences of judgment in the intelligence community.

(3) We emphatically agree with the need for more close and continuing contact with policymakers, to refine terms of reference, to discover what questions require full treatment, and to supplement as may be necessary the text of the completed estimates. We think this could best be achieved through more frequent participation in policy meetings by personnel from this Office, who are now much isolated in this regard. Other methods would include more systematic discussion with those who request estimates, while the papers are in preparation, and more feed-back from consumers after the estimates are completed.

(4) We do not recommend a systematic, generalized, study of user needs, but have suggested alternative possibilities.

  
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